Dreaming in Arcadia: Vexillological Relationships on Lord Howe Island

by Edwin Crump

Abstract Lord Howe Island is remote and its population is small, yet the power of flags reaches even there, 600km east of the Australian mainland. This presentation reports on research undertaken in 2012 to examine the relationship between the Lord Howe Island Flag and those on the island it seeks to represent as part of a broader effort to theoretically understand referent objects' reaction to flags as symbols. Utilising a combination of survey data and in-depth interviews it firstly argues how flags can be simultaneously unifying and divisive symbolic devices within and without communities by exploring the process of encoding locally constructed mythologies onto flags, before secondly examining the relationship between the social construction of meanings of flags and the citizens who themselves construct it, including the importance of origin myths in establishing the legitimacy of a flag. The presentation will conclude with reflections about the role of flags in construction of national identity, and its role in synedochally representing the nation.

Introduction

This presentation will examine the unofficial flag of Lord Howe Island (LHI), a small island 600km northeast of Sydney Australia that is World Heritage listed for its Outstanding Universal Value. This presentation will reveal how one collectivity, the approximately 290 Lord Howe Islanders engage in processes of identity construction mediated by the prime symbol of the local (unofficial) flag.

Firstly I will describe the context of my research, including the geographic setting and methodology. I will then outline 3 significant findings from my research, before concluding and taking questions.

Figure 1 – Unofficial Flag of Lord Howe Island

Lord Howe Island is small and distant from the Australian mainland that lengthwise measures just over ten kilometres long. Its total population is approximately 350 people, though a similar number of tourists are vacationing on the island at any one time. The dispersion of flags has continued even to this remote island group.

The unofficial Lord Howe Island Flag (see Figure 1) was created in 2001 yet the Lord Howe Island Flag is part of what I label a neo-heritage school of flag design. It is a new flag using a visual construction similar to that of pre-Prinsenvlag flags. The visual construction indicates the function of the flag is linked to the island's history, heritage and shared understandings of the past, in comparison to future-looking flags such as that of Malawi (see Figure 2).

The flag's design is reminiscent of both the colonial flag of India and the Red Ulster

Figure 2 The Flag of Malawi

flag of Northern Ireland. Both flags use the governing power's flag, the British and the English respectively, defaced by a local device. In this regard the Lord Howe Island Flag affirms a particular subjectivity and island historiography as determined by the flag's creator; the colonial connection to Britain and its representative Admiral Howe. As a modern invention, the Lord Howe Island Flag's visual construction utilises pre-conceived symbols of the island (rather than existent ideas such as in the French flag)

My research, conducted on two study trips to the island in 2012, consisted of three stages. The research utilised a mixed-methods approach and includes findings from a survey conducted amongst Islanders as well as data from a number of in-depth inter-views in addition to background research and researcher observation on the island.

The methodology used in this research project is based on social constructivism. Social constructivism is an appropriate methodology to approach vexillological re-search, for the role of discourse is crucial for, as Wendt (2000) argues, acting as a legitimating process that affects real-world outcomes.

Findings

Multivocality and the transcoding of cultural mythologies

Firstly, I argue that flags are dynamic objects with their meaning established by the discourse given unto them, rather than static objects containing intrinsic meaning. Additionally, my research confirms the findings of Turner (1967) that flags are "con-densed symbols" and of Eriksen that they are also "symbolic containers" that "bolster and confirm the sense of identification with one another" (ibid., p. 4). My research has shown also how, through the everyday social relations on the island, Islanders and visitors shape notions about the flag, their relationship to it and consequently to themselves and each other.

Some researchers have argued that flags are unifying devices, yet some have argued equally forcefully that flags can be divisive symbols for those the flag(s) seek to repre-sent. I argue that they can be simultaneously unifying and divisive. I argue that flags have complex relationships with populations and do not necessitate a specific an-tiphon, although a similar processual model of interaction does appear to emerge in a variety of contexts.

Multivocality

The social model of interaction that allows this apparent paradox is the notion of "multivocality", described by Cohen in 2001. Flags are able to obtain their popularity amongst diverse populations thanks to their ability to be "symbolic containers" within which adherents place multiple, potentially conflicting meanings into. For example, the Australian Eureka flag (See Figure 3) can contain meanings attributed to both left-wing unionism and right-wing racial supremacy – both linked to "hot" nationalist tendencies. Thus, there is not one "true" meaning of a flag.

On LHI, as elsewhere, "multi-vocality" has allowed Islanders with diverse interests to share in the symbolic imagery of the flag. It also indicates meanings are created through a process of learning, taught and given meaning through the discourse that

Figure 3 The Eureka Flag

is attributed to it (Kolstø, 2006, p. 676). The material of the flag does not contain intrinsic meaning, though the design may draw upon existing symbolic imagery, and create or engender new imagery and meaning.

Transcoding cultural mythology
The method by which multivocality is possible is through the transcoding of mythology on to a flag. Transcoding is a vital process whereby a flag is symbolically loaded to create a meaningful object for those it seeks to represent, its referent objects.

If the process of transcoding takes place as I claim above, it is important to understand what is actually transcoded. My research signaled that two elements were transcoded. Firstly, cultural mythology and secondly, personal mythology. Cultural mythology is the collective understanding of a group attributed to the flag, determined by the historical understanding engendered by significant historical events, traditions, national history and state education. Personal mythology on the other hand is the individual attitudes and understandings of the flag and its place in the everyday lives of the citizen. These two elements provide the foundations for understanding how flags gain their widespread acceptance and symbolic importance within and without communities.

The process of transcoding is an essential social process to transform a flag from a piece of cloth to a symbol with perceived importance. This process engenders a perceived importance that imparts to the flag social, cultural and political power in the everyday lives of its referent objects. This argument accords with Billig's (1995) theory of Banal Nationalism, which argues that citizens feel a stronger emotional attachment to those objects that have been established throughout everyday interaction and state education. In comparison, unfamiliar flags have difficulty arousing a strong emotional response.

However, the process of transcoding cultural mythologies onto flags can be affected by various social and cultural attitudes that are external to the flag and the flag's referent objects.

The importance of origin myths in symbolic legitimacy
Danes claim to have the oldest flag in continual use, and Dannebrog's origin myth continues to play an important role in Danish identification with it, and attitude towards it, despite any veracity of the original story (Denmark.dk, 2012). On LHI too, the origin myth of the flag plays an important role in Islanders' conception of it and of its legitimation as a representative symbolic device.

Lord Howe Islanders indicated that the origin myth of the Lord Howe Island Flag has clouded the instrumental and emotional functions of the flag, and accordingly, Islanders' adherence. It has retarded the process of transcoding, as described previously, the Lord Howe Island identity and Islanders' personal and cultural mythologies onto the flag.

Origin myths are important as they affect the manner in which the flag's referent objects relate to it. The origin myth of a flag may affect whether or not the flag receives

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paper 15/ 3

support and adherence and becomes a legitimate representative community symbol. Interviewee 04 noted this conditional support: "I'm very supportive of the flag, but then I know about its origin genesis." So did Interviewee 09: "If it had been designed by a local it probably would be embraced more greatly." Knowledge of the myth deterred Interviewee 01. Their deterrence was confirmed despite the attraction of the visual construction of the flag. The purported facts of the myth made them feel emotionally disconnected, and even hostile, to the flag:

Well, it's obviously been well designed professionally. And the colours and everything are supposed to have some relevance: the blue the yellow, the white of the island, whatever, but for me it doesn't represent the island because it's something that has been designed by somebody who is totally removed from all of the important things that the island has [i.e. LHI citizenship].

The social construction of meaning attributed to the flag by the origin myth and its propagation is one factor of its multivocality. The "knowledge" surrounding the flag, created through social interaction, both affects adherence to the flag and decreases its legitimacy amongst certain members of the island community. The visual construction of the flag, despite its material tangibility and even despite appropriate symbolism and representation as legitimated by the Islanders themselves, is of lesser importance than the meanings Islanders attribute to it. It also indicates the importance of intra-community development for establishing the legitimacy of community symbols.

Flags are able to fulfill their civic, public role when they are "capable of making them [citizens] feel similar before the flag" (Eriksen, 2007, p. 10). When a flag is a metaphorically empty vessel, citizens can bring various meanings and attribute them to the flag, even if these meanings conflict. Conversely, when the vessel is already full or coloured by pre-existing issues, such as an origin myth, this may serve to divide communities, not unite them. The Lord Howe Island Flag also faces a challenge in developing a legitimate origin myth in the Enlightenment/Post-Enlightenment era. Citizens are unlikely to attribute origin myths to supernatural factors such as divine providence.

Flags compel citizens of the respective community to remember their imagined community, those fellow countrymen-strangers (perhaps) unseen who constitute those they imagine they are similar to. In the case of LHI, this attribution may also result from the flag's youth. Although divergent narratives have already developed, Islanders can still remember the flag's origin, and, accordingly, it is more difficult to mythologise.

Display and Control in Civic Space

Flags have emotional impacts on those they claim to represent, either negatively in rejection of a flag or positively in adherence to and admiration of them. These emotions are intensified when the flag is displayed in a public setting. When a flag is publically displayed and seeks public legitimation, the emotional intensity of issues surrounding the flag increases manifold compared to simply the design of a flag representing a particular place.

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paper 15/ 4

One of the first acts of the original Chief Magistrate of LHI, Captain Richard Armstrong, was to raise a Union Flag on the island to symbolise the introduction of comme il faut colonial governance (Armstrong, 2008, p. 302).

Thus, the display of the Lord Howe Island Flag on the island threatens those who do not identify with that, as it challenges their legitimacy and legacy on LHI. Consequently, it represents an unwelcome takeover of control of civic (public) space by an immigrant non-Islander and their (commercial and private) interests.

Flags represent the re-territorialisation of local social space as a consequence of the economic de-territorialisation evident in globalisation. Although the Lord Howe Island Flag does not represent vivid separatism as in the display of the Scånian or Scottish flags, its existence and prominent use on the island threatens the homogeneity (as it exists) of the overarching Australian nation as flags represent not only territorial units but the political systems that compose it (Bornman, 2005). Thus, a government may transcode a separatist vocality onto the flag where none exists amongst the Islanders themselves. As emotional objects, flags affect both insiders and outsiders, with respectively differing reactions.

Conclusion

Some implications for vexillology and nationalism are observable from this research.

Firstly, this research has demonstrated how flags are important regardless of the community's size – flags operate similarly in diverse collectivities. Contextual research then does not undermine social scientific study, but improves it.

I demonstrated the importance and operation of flags' "multivocality" in a variety of contexts and explained the process of transcoding as it occurs.

I established legitimization, in terms of a flag's origin myth, as a crucial element in understanding how flags operate. Legitimisation may be more important in areas with new flags, or places representing one version of a past. Flags can be used to define a past, a heritage that helps citizens to make sense of themselves and the world around them.

I further explored the role of flags and public symbols as elements of display and control in public space.

This research has also established how elements of national iconography gain their meaning and consequent significance by social interactions through the process of discourse. It indicated flags are not composed of intrinsic meaning but are dynamic objects, potentially able to aid the ministrations of whoever succeeds in attributing a hegemonic discourse; a warning for flags at risk of political polarisation such as the Australian National Flag (Gelber, 2012, p. 165).

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Biography

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